

When Mosa Preserved a History

J. P. Morgan was the richest man in turn-of-the-century America. Edward Curtis, the largely uneducated son of a tub-thumping preacher, entered his Morgan's office timidly, hoping for a contribution because the focus of Curtis's life was floundering, even though he'd already bagged the backing of President Teddy Roosevelt.

Edward Curtis dreamed of chronicling traditional Native American life with portraits of Native people. Immense changes were ongoing in the lives of the Dakota, the Comanche, the Omaha, *and* every other Native American—changes that would alter lives forever. His photographic project required thousands in cash, so his getting into the front office of J. P. Morgan, the financial giant, was well planned. He could not fail.

Historians say what Curtis hadn't expected was the tycoon's nose, which, they say, had become something extraordinary, "like the fog light of a ship, making it impossible to turn away," one biographer says. It was as red and inflamed, and for a moment at least it left the photographer breathless.

But Edward Curtis was on a mission that his life had become: he would sacrifice everything he loved outside of his dream to document traditional Native America with the faces of its people.

He had his words and approach in order. He knew J. P. Morgan spent money lavishly on art. Curtis's collection of portraits, he told the tycoon, would cost institutions \$5000 per subscription. They were precious. Traditional Native life couldn't continue. Buffalo were already gone. There was so much nobility in the Indian people, he told Morgan. Could he count on the industrialist's support?

"I will be unable to help you," the Wall Street banker told him.

Didn't stop Curtis. Instead he drew some portraits from his portfolio and spread them out on the desk.

J.P. Morgan looked closely but said nothing.

And then, his biographers say, Edward Curtis showed him Mosa, the Mohave girl.

Morgan stepped back, then leaned forward, hands down on the desk, studying a child, a girl who seemed beyond her years, and even beyond her tribe. Her long mahogany hair flowed over both her shoulders, a bundle of woven necklaces strung round her neck. Mosa, a Mohave girl whose eyes like *Mona Lisa's* held what one biographer calls "a penitent sorrow" that begs compassion, a rare beauty that went far deeper than her painted cheeks.

The story goes that Morgan looked at Mosa for a long time, and then told Curtis, "I will lend financial assistance for the publication of a set of books illustrated with photographs such as these."

Curtis took no salary for his work. He died alone and almost destitute; but documenting vanishing Native America is a legacy only he left behind. J. P. Morgan is gone too. He didn't die a pauper.

But Mosa survives, the precious image Curtis caught.

Beauty, Emerson once said, is God's own handwriting.

No one will ever know why a portrait of a young Mohave girl turned Morgan's opinion around on a dime.

Why that one, when Curtis had shown him a dozen others, some of which have become far even more familiar? Why her? Why Mosa?

No one knows.

Curtis got his financial support by way of the portrait of a Mohave girl otherwise totally lost to history.

Only her face, like beauty itself, survives.